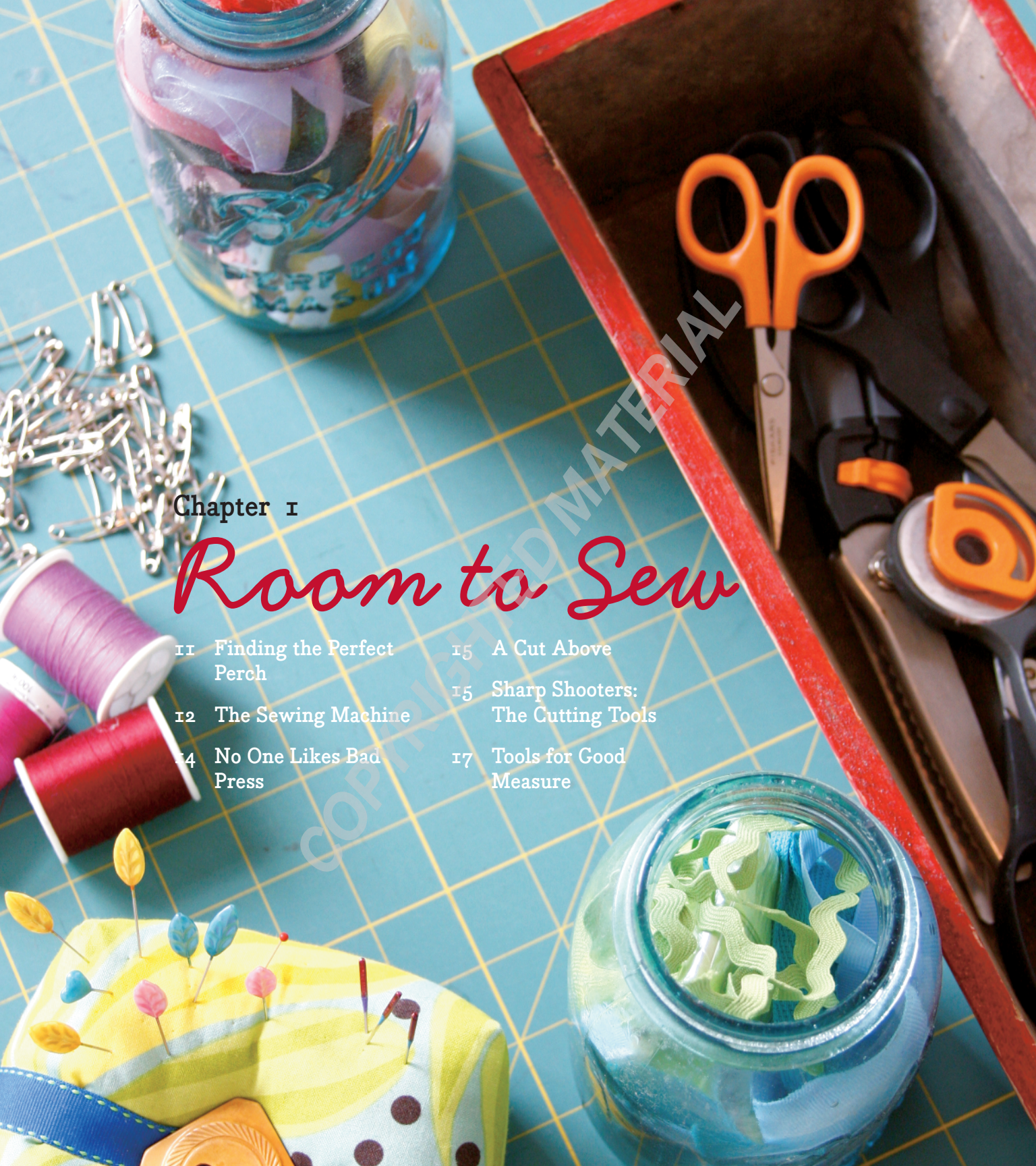

Chapter 1

Room to Sew

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Whether sewing is new to you or not, one of the greatest challenges in home sewing is finding the right space and stocking it. If you're just beginning, it's likely that you will amass over time gadgets, tools, and a fabric stash with each new project that you tackle. To get you started, I will discuss the sewing must-haves or basic items that you will need and how to create a functional and enjoyable sewing space.

Finding the Perfect Perch

Do you have a 500-square-foot studio? Great! You only have a spare bedroom? Perfect! What did you say, a mere corner in the laundry room? Oooo, cozy! Just the dusty floor of a coat closet? That'll do; get the broom and let's get to work!

Well, Look at You!

If you are one of the lucky ones who have an entire room in your house dedicated to your sewing, first be very thankful. Right after that, think about your space. You'll need three main centers of function—a place to do your folding and cutting (a roomy table or counter), a place to do your pressing (an ironing board), and a spot to do your sewing (the sewing machine area). This trio is best arranged in a "U" formation, whether you have a small or very spacious room.

I've sewn in every type of environment that I've listed so far, and am still learning what works best. I've had a mere closet, and I've had an 1,800-square-foot studio/boutique. In all instances, I've enjoyed the process of making the most of it, and it has always involved using some found furniture or storage.

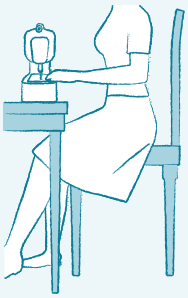
Whether it's the sewing table, the chair, the shelves, the cutting table, or whatever else you're on the hunt for, repurposing old garage sale or estate sale furniture into something useful can be very rewarding. It just takes a little creativity and brainpower to take the place of the dollars you would otherwise spend on all-new pieces. Talk to people you know who sew, and ask what setup works for them and why. It can sometimes take professionals years to get their sewing space the way they want it. Like any designing in your home, it is not an overnight process, but a personal journey to a place you may end up liking best of all.

Pull Up a Chair

Setting your sewing machine on a standard-height dining table and sitting yourself in a standard-height dining chair will put you too low to sew comfortably. You don't want to be reaching up to sew, nor do you want to be reaching down. Neither of these options is good for the back, neck, or shoulders. It's also not good for your project results!

For a test to see if your chair-and-table setup is ideal, you could try the following: put your machine on the table and sit in the chair right up to it; with your upper arms relaxed down to your sides, raise up your forearms so that they are bending at a perfect perpendicular angle toward the machine; then flex back your wrists a bit so that your hands can rest comfortably on the extension table or near the needle

plate (which is the flat part of the machine where your fabric runs across). If you have to hunch up your shoulders to do this, or are raising your elbows up quite a bit, you are most likely sitting too low. Find a suitable chair, like a rolling, adjustable office chair, and be the high-and-mighty seamstress you always wanted to be.



Creative Control Station

For those of you that have a corner in a room where you can leave your sewing setup intact around the clock, you can think of your space as a workstation. You would likely want to employ some space-saving measures within your workstation and have most everything you need during your sewing time within arm's reach. There are countless all-in-one sewing-table arrangements in the marketplace in a range of prices, much like computer stations, that are ideal for this situation. Many of these sewing stations have folding table extensions for cutting your fabrics, and shelves or drawers underneath for storing supplies.

This may seem obvious but, if you take the plunge and buy a sewing center, *sit at it first!* There are poorly designed sewing tables out there that barely leave room for your legs when you are sitting at the machine. You'll never sit dead-center in front of a sewing machine; you'll sit center-left in front of the needle of the sewing machine. So test it in the store and make sure that you are comfortable and you have enough leg room. Because of this, I wouldn't recommend buying a sewing center or sewing cabinet online or from a catalog, unless they can guarantee returns.

See What I Mean?

Natural sunlight is a glorious and perfect (and free) light in which to sew, as well as to do your pinning and cutting. That doesn't mean that you can sew only during the day. Pfiff! You may be burning the midnight oil, but one little ceiling fixture won't do. This is true for either nighttime or daytime sewing.

A lighting expert would suggest that you have at least 150 watts of incandescent or 40 watts of fluorescent light for all the tasks in your sewing projects. This should be shaded light, not bare bulbs shining in your eyes. Try to situate the lighting around your sewing machine area so that it's not casting shadows where you are working. If you have the table or the floor space nearby, an adjustable arm lamp is a good way to get the light situated just where you need it.

There are all types of special sewing lights available, but it's not a must. If you have special needs concerning your vision, absolutely make that a priority and get the advice of your eye doctor as well. Especially for hand sewing, there are many light and magnifier combinations on the market to make your sewing time more comfortable on the eyes. Some lights will help you see color more accurately when you are matching cloth to thread as well.

Color Me Happy

Talking about light also means talking about color. Yes, indeed. Lighter shades on the walls will be more reflective and provide more surrounding light. The same applies to every last surface of the whole room. The floor will be more reflective if it's wood or some other slick surface, rather than carpet, especially a light-colored, slick surface.

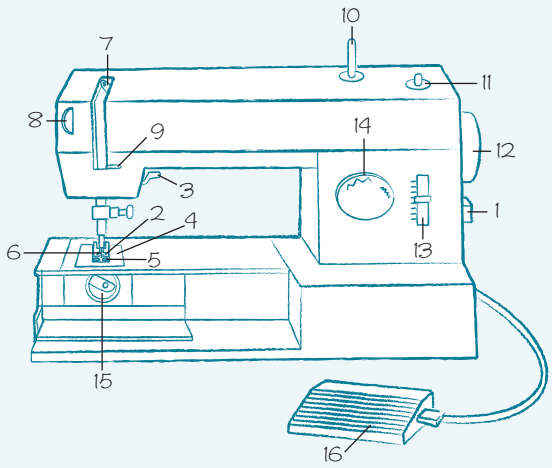
The color of your sewing space is as personal a decision as the fancy fabrics you choose for your sewing projects. Most of all, it needs to make you happy. If there is any spot in the house that you want to get a little kooky-creative with, this is the place to play. If you are set on a deep wall color, perhaps apply it to only one wall and not the wall by your sewing machine.

The Sewing Machine

Choosing a sewing machine is a very weighted decision for some, but not something that should be a drag or difficult. My first machine was 30 years old by the time it was all mine, and I made countless things on that old faithful friend. I've sewn on all kinds of machines from several different manufacturers. Everyone has a different opinion about what brand to go with or how many bells and whistles should be ringing and singing when you sew. You should think of the perfect machine as being an extension of you. The best machine for you is the one that keeps you inspired to try new things but doesn't overwhelm you. Therefore, making this decision is a completely personal one, which is why I am not endorsing any particular sewing machine in this book. But let's chat about some things to consider before you purchase one.

Bobbin' Around a Sewing Machine

If you've never sewn before or are very new to sewing, it's helpful to have a handle on the general layout of a basic machine before you start shopping for your own or test-driving them. Every machine will vary to a certain degree. If you've just bought a machine, it should come with a detailed user's manual. Never buy one without it. Below is a general image guide to a machine, followed by a list and description of its parts. Keep in mind that some of the settings shown as a knob on this diagram may be adjusted through an LCD screen on a computerized machine.



1 Power switch
2 Presser foot
3 Presser foot lifter
4 Throat plate
5 Feed dogs
6 Needle
7 Thread take-up
8 Upper tension regulator
9 Thread guide
10 Spool pin
11 Bobbin winder
12 Balance wheel
13 Stitch length regulator
14 Stitch width regulator
15 Bobbin case/bobbin
16 Foot control

A lifetime of sewing will most likely involve more than one machine. So if you can make a healthy investment, stitch quality and user-friendliness are hallmarks of what to look for. A great machine should last for decades.

Ask Yourself This

You should begin your sewing machine hunt by asking yourself some questions. It might be a good idea to write your answers to these questions to help you formulate what you'll be looking for.

- What kind of items will I be making? Quilting, garments, or both?
- What kind of fabrics do I want to sew with?
- What is my budget?
- How often will I use the machine?
- Do I want to start a home-based sewing business?
- Am I a beginner, experienced, or expert seamstress?
- Will I need/want to upgrade as I become more experienced?

Shop It

Just like bringing home any other type of technology or appliance, it's always good to read consumer reviews. If your friends and family sew, ask them what they sew on, and then do an online search on those models. Or ask to try out a friend's machine before you take the plunge yourself. Many sewing magazines offer product reviews in an annual issue or on the magazine's Web site when the new models debut.

Like everything else, you'll have several choices of machines for sale online, in fabric stores, in department stores, and through local dealers. Of all these choices, I can't really advise buying a machine online, unless you've already had a chance to test-sew with the exact same model. Even so, every machine is unique, just like a car, and they all have personalities, even when you're buying high-end.

The single most important rule I would offer about buying any sewing machine, no matter how much you spend, is *sew on it as much as you can before buying it*. You must love the way it sews or at least be comfortable with how it feels, even if it's a lower-end model. Call ahead and find out a non-busy time to visit the store or dealer. Bring in your own fabric scraps, thread, trims, and anything else you want to cart into the store. If they say you can't use your own materials or that you can sew on it only for a minute or two, then that should be your last verbal exchange on your

way out the door. Let the salesperson show you every feature possible, even the buttonhole feature. Then do not be afraid to try everything out yourself. Twice.

Going in for the Buy

The machine is obviously going to be the biggest single investment in your sewing world. So while you shouldn't stress over it, you shouldn't take it lightly, either, especially if you are spending more than a few hundred dollars. If you are spending less than that, you may consider buying a used machine from a dealer, especially if it comes with a locally based warranty or trade-in value. It isn't a bad way to get started. There is nothing wrong with spending only $100 on a brand-new machine at your local discount store—just don't expect much. It may be the perfect thing to get you started on simple projects, but your skill level will eventually exceed what it can do for you in terms of stitch quality and dependability. The opposite would also be true. It may be foolish to have a payment plan for an $8,000 machine that completely exceeds your skill level and needs.

If you are shy and don't feel like you know how to negotiate well, take an experienced sewing friend with you, to help out. In fact, take this book with you. There are advantages to going to a local dealer, such as having access to a repair shop or a chance to upgrade later, classes on your new machine or on learning how to expand your equipment attachments, meeting other people who love sewing, and having an actual face to talk to when something goes wrong. Your machine should always come with at least basic manufacturer's warranty, but it's up to you whether you feel more comfortable purchasing additional warranties.

No One Likes Bad Press

When you're sewing that snazzy stuff, you should be using an iron just about as much as you use your sewing machine, possibly even more. Every single line of stitching that you make should be pressed at one point, and usually before the item is even finished. So, you need to consider setting up a place for pressing near your sewing area. If you don't already own an iron and ironing board that you're happy with, you may want to add these items to your shopping list.

Note: Before you press, always test a little unused corner of your fabric first, for the right heat and process.

The Iron

Who loves to iron? No hands raised? Agreed. Well, you actually don't have to *iron* while you sew. However, you do have to *press* while you sew. There is a difference. Pressing is less dragging across the fabric and more, well, pressing, and almost always with steam. The tools for this task are pretty much the same, though. The iron is one item where you may want to be really picky about what you choose.

First and foremost, it has to be a steam iron, and an anti-drip system is a very good feature. You will sometimes want a dry setting too, so be sure your new iron has both options. Auto-off is a must-have feature, although you should always unplug your iron when you are not using it. Your mother said so. Choosing your iron from a fabric store, whether online or actually in the shop, comes highly recommended by this author. Ask questions, too! Most of those sweet folks at the fabric store have years of sewing experience and are more than happy to offer advice on their favorites.

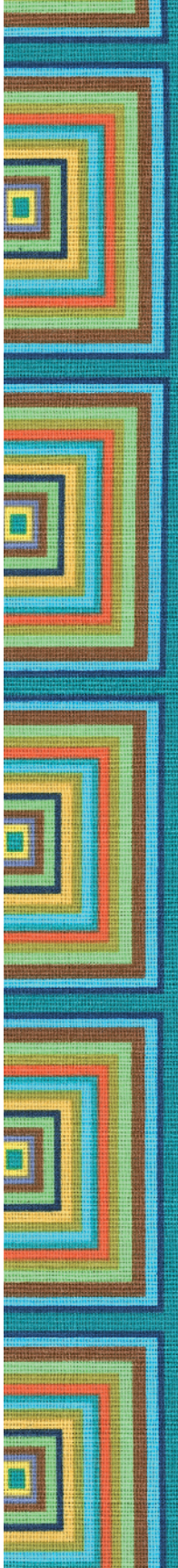
One hundred dollars will likely buy you the best iron you've ever had, but there is quality to be had at even $40 or so. Pressing is the one process, besides your sewing, that has the most impact on the outcome of your sewing project. This cannot be stressed (or pressed) enough!

The Ironing Board

If you're in the market for a new board, you can pay a lot or a little, but do invest based on your enthusiasm for your new hobby, because it should last forever. Go ahead and open it up in the store, if you can, to get a feel for it. Make sure it doesn't wobble, and it's a bonus if it has an adjustable height setting. A nice wide board is really beneficial, especially for ironing quilts and other large items.

If you are battling for floor space, some boards drop down from the wall, out of a cabinet, or from a closet door. Wall-mount hooks are also a good temporary storage option if you want the board out of sight when you are not using it.

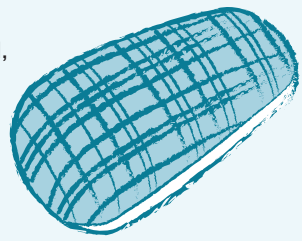
An alternative to an ironing board is an ironing blanket or ironing pad. This nifty little portable roll-up or fold-up pad lets you turn a cutting table, countertop, or bed into a usable pressing surface. If you are using an ironing board to press a large item, however, pull the board up next to a large table or bed where your quilt (or whatever your project may be) can spread across it without ending up on the floor.



Other Pressing Matters

These next goodies are not considered *pressing* (as in mandatory); they are *for* pressing.

- A **pressing cloth** is a way to protect your fabric from the effects of the iron as you press during sewing. As long as your heat settings are correct for the particular fabric, pressing the wrong side of the fabric might not be necessary. When you press the right side of the fabric, however, you should use a pressing cloth in order to avoid the heat or pressure from the iron negatively affecting the fabric.
- A **soleplate cover** is another product altogether, but a pretty clever one. It acts like a pressing cloth, but it slips over your iron so that you can easily see what you're working on. It allows you to iron over things like buttons and zippers, and is perfect for pressing delicate fabrics.
- A **pressing ham** is a very firmly packed, contoured, fabric-covered form that looks pretty much like the shape of a whole ham. Over its entire surface, there are a multitude of angles and curves that, depending on how you position it, will help when you are pressing curved seams. You simply let the ham rest on the board and lay your seam over the part of the ham form that best fits the shape of your curved seam, and press.



- A **seam roll** is a long, firmly stuffed cylinder that you can insert underneath long, straight seams and into narrow areas like a sleeve. Having your seam resting on a cylinder-shaped seam roll rather than a flat surface allows you to press only the very center of the seam, right where the fabric is stitched together, and not on the entire seam and seam allowance.

A Cut Above

A good cutting surface at the appropriate height makes all the difference in how accurately your fabric is cut, and whether or not your back is aching at the end of the day. The floor is certainly practical, but it's no fun to sweep before you put your fresh fabrics on the floor. (Sewing is what you do instead of house-cleaning, silly.)

If one item in your cutting-sewing-pressing process had to be located elsewhere, it could be the cutting table. Your first step really should be cutting out all your pieces, anyway. This opens up the possibility to use any table in the house. In fact, the table that eventually becomes your sewing table could first serve as your cutting table.

In general, the height of your cutting table should be about kitchen-counter or kitchen-island height (about 36 inches), and *not* kitchen-table height (about 30 inches). If you are very petite, this height might put your cutting surface too high for reaching all the way across, so do use whichever is more comfortable. If you're teaching your children to sew, just keep a sturdy footstool nearby so they can see what you're working on.

If the size of the tabletop is at least as big as a card table, it's usable. Two card tables pushed together are even better, and pretty economical. Not tall enough? Slide some cinder blocks underneath each leg to raise the height. Bigger is better in the case of the cutting table, but there are some tricks to working on a smaller table. Use a chair or two chairs, side by side, at the end of your table, facing in, to hold your bolt or roll of fabric when you are dealing with a lot of yardage. This way, the bolt or roll of fabric isn't sliding off as you try to cut, and the backs of the chairs are keeping the fabric from landing on the floor.

Sharp Shooters: The Cutting Tools

A cutting tool is another personal thing where one size does not fit all. We each get comfortable with the familiar, or what works for us.

Scissors

You really need only two pairs of scissors: a pair of quality shears for cutting fabrics, and a pair of smaller scissors for snipping threads at the machine, or beside you as you hand-sew. My favorite studio tool by far is my tiny pair of scissors. You should always keep the little ones on a long ribbon around your neck when you're sewing, since they're little and easily misplaced (or is that just me?).

Scissors are definitely another item where quality really does matter. What you spend now will save you later, and with good care and occasional sharpening,

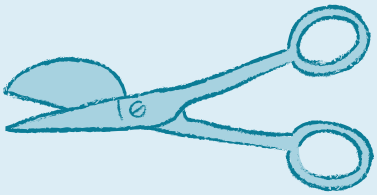
they can last you a very long time. In the manufacturing process, scissors are made in one of two ways: they are either forged or stamped. You'll want to get a pair that is forged because they will be much more durable, and of course, they're also pricier. Refer to the concise but practical list below for scissor types and their common uses. This is hardly comprehensive, but for the projects in this book and endless others, it's a good start.

Whatever you choose, take care of your scissors. Dropping them will not only knick your floor and put your feet in danger, but it can also knick the tips of the blades. In some cases, the alignment of the scissors could get knocked out of whack. Save the not-so-good scissors for cutting up things like paper patterns, sequins, plastic, or other non-fabric items in your sewing studio. Reserve your best scissors for the fabrics. If you have two scissors that look alike, tie a small strip of fabric through the sewing scissors' handle as a reminder for yourself and everyone else in the house that they are for fabric only.

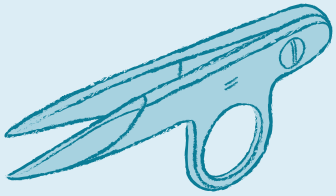
Rotary Cutters

The rotary cutter is a different breed of blade altogether. It comes in a large size for all cutting such as your dress patterns and patchwork, or a small size for trimming and smaller craft projects. Using a rotary cutter can give a nice razor-sharp and accurate cut on several layers of fabric with one cut. However, deciding between this and using scissors really just comes down to preference and familiarity. Rotary cutters are not horribly expensive, and, unlike having to keep scissors sharp, you would just replace the disposable blade when it gets dull.

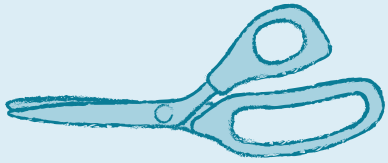
Even if you are comfortable with your scissors, I'd encourage you to give rotary cutting a try. You may find that you like to use scissors for some cutting and a rotary cutter for other cutting. You will probably be amazed at the ease with which it cuts through fabric the first time you use one. They are great if you are doing piece work or are making one pattern several times. I



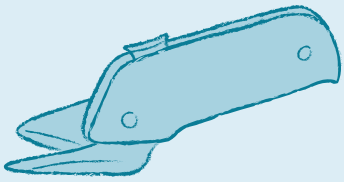
Appliqué scissors or duckbilled scissors have a curved shape on one blade that makes cutting a single layer of fabric easier in appliqué.



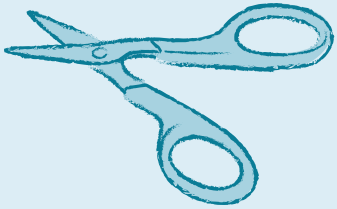
Thread nips or clippers are a small clipper, rather than a standard scissor. They are either spring-loaded or have a hairpin curve of metal as the handle.



Dressmaking shears are the most common type of scissor used in sewing and are available in 6-inch lengths all the way up to 12-inch lengths—a 7- or 8-inch length is comfortable for most home sewers. Look for shears that have a bent handle, so that the bottom blade will lie flat against your cutting surface.



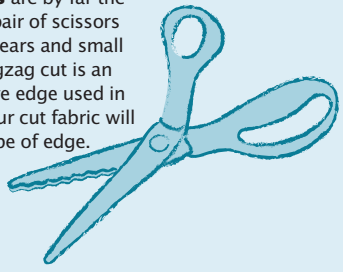
Electric scissors are battery operated. They are a good option for those with hand problems or for someone who needs scissors that are ergonomically designed for comfort.



Embroidery scissors are small, lightweight, and a perfect choice for that petite pair to clip threads as you hand-sew or machine-sew. They are usually only 3 or 4 inches in blade length. Watch the points on these, as they are nice and sharp!

Heavy fabric scissors or tailor's shears are good for cutting through denim, canvas, or multiple layers of fabric. This is where you may want to go with longer blades, like 10 or 12 inches.

Pinking scissors or shears are by far the best candidate for the third pair of scissors (in addition to dressmaker shears and small scissors or clippers). The zigzag cut is an irresistibly cute and decorative edge used in many crafting applications. Your cut fabric will resist fraying with this type of edge.



Silhouette embroidery scissors or iris scissors are very small and lightweight, with long handles and short, sharp little blades. They are perfect for fine handiwork.

use a rotary cutter for all my quilt cutting and longer cuts on garments, and I save the scissor cutting for inner corners and other picky stuff.

Cutting Mats

Using a rotary cutter most definitely requires the use of a cutting mat. Any other surface would become damaged with rotary cuts, and you would need to toss the blade in the trash almost immediately because it would quickly dull. Most people (including me) prefer to purchase a self-healing cutting mat. This mat is different from the hard mats that you would use with an X-Acto blade.

Getting a mat that is at least 18 x 24 inches is advisable. Anything smaller would have you constantly checking under the fabric to see if you've gone off the mat. Putting two smaller mats together is okay, except that you will undoubtedly always have a few fibers of fabric that didn't get cut because the fabric was pushed into the crease of the two mats when you made the cut. Having one large mat can help you avoid the annoying task of going back to snip those few fibers that you missed.

The bonus of a self-healing cutting mat is its measuring grid, which is so helpful when you are trying to cut a perfect right angle. Believe it or not, though, you should double-check the measurement marks on your mat against a trusty ruler before you rely on them as a definitive guide. In fact, when you are shopping for mats, it wouldn't hurt to have your best ruler on hand to check the measurements for accuracy before you make a purchase. There is sometimes the smallest bit of play in the thick lines of the mat that can get a project, like small-piece quilting, into trouble because the measurements need to be so precise.

Tools for Good Measure

Inching closer toward the goal of a blissful life of sewing, you will find yourself needing to measure things. All kinds of things need to be measured: fabric width and length, arms, legs, busts (yowza!), waists (no!), hips (forget it), hems, seams, windows, dogs, kids, you name it! It all needs to be measured, generally by the yard (¾ yard, ½ yard, ¼ yard), fat quarters (see page 37), inches (⅝ inch, ½ inch, ⅜ inch, ¼ inch), and perhaps centimeters every now and then. Whew! The following is an overview of some tools that you can use for measuring yourself and your environment.

Tape Measure

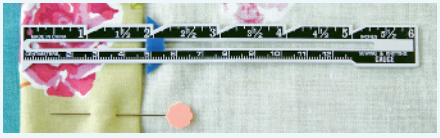
A tape measure is an essential tool in your beginner kit. I'm not talking about the hefty metal retractable one in the garage toolbox, either. You need the sewing sort, which is a flexible ribbon of either sturdy fabric or plastic with linear units of measure, preferably metric and imperial (inches) measurements on both sides. You'll want to get a good-quality version that doesn't stretch out with a little wear and tear. The basic measuring tape is either 36 inches long (1 yard) or 60 inches long (5 feet). A simple 60-inch tape should meet most of your needs. I like to store mine hanging over a hook (or around my neck) rather than rolled up, to prevent curling.

The tape measure is generally what you use when you are measuring for sewing a garment, or anything else that's not flat. This is precisely why it's flexible.

Yardstick

A yardstick is a yardstick, no matter what anyone says. Wooden, metal, it doesn't matter. Although the metal ones can be prone to bending (i.e., rowdy boys having jousting practice). What they are intended for is measuring anything up to 3 feet, which also just happens to be a yard, or 36 inches.

Sewing Gauge



A sewing gauge is a 6-inch ruler with a sliding marker that you can move to your desired measurement. To hem a skirt all the way around, you would set the sliding part of the sewing gauge at your desired mark and hold the end of the ruler (the 0-inch end) at the bottom edge of the fabric, and turn up the hem at the mark all the way around. It's much quicker this way because you can get a quick visual read of that sliding perpendicular mark, instead of checking the little hairline measurement with every stop around the hem. It's also great for measuring and marking tucks and pleats, and for spacing out buttons and buttonholes. I think of this as my go-to gauge for all small measuring needs that require consistency.